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Perspective

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A spy can strike from deep cover

THE SOVIET government has few virtues. But patience is one of them.

So when it buries an espionage agent like KGB Col. Rudolph Albert Herrmann for nearly a dozen years in the United States, it expects to reap benefits from his presence in our midst — sooner or later.

For a decade or two, perhaps even a lifetime, a Soviet spy like Col. Herrmann may lead the life of a normal appearing American. He may perform a few mundane chores for his Kremlin masters. But mostly, he will be left alone.

Then some day — in a time of serious diplomatic rupture or war between the U.S. and Soviet Russia — the agent will be activated as though someone had pushed a button to launch a missile back in Moscow.

Then that normal-appearing American will be transformed into a deadly saboteur, terrorist, or intelligence agent. He will perform the one function for which he has been waiting most of his adult life.

And if he retains the talents so carefully refined in the communist training academies of the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, that patient investment in time and money made by Moscow so many years earlier will have paid off.

A critical military facility will be reduced to rubble. A nuclear installation will be destroyed. A political leader will be assassinated. Or the secrecy of naval, airborne, and troop movements will be compromised with disastrous results.

PEOPLE LIKE Col. Herrmann, who successfully posed as a New York freelance photographer for 11 years before being turned into a double agent by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, are called illegals.

That means they are foreign nationals who have slipped into the country with forged credentials and blended into the American lifestyle.

Invariably, they are highly trained espionage specialists who have been trained in scientific or technical fields to provide th

Unlike the Soviet and Eastern bloc diplomats who are more readily identifiable as spies, the illegals are only a few among nearly 220 million Americans. They are tough to ferret out. But they are the most potentially dangerous.

For they are the agents who would swing into destructive action in a time of crisis or hostilities when their diplomatic counterparts are interned or deported.

In the interim, illegals perform certain low-risk tasks that a foreign diplomat, doubling as a KGB agent might not dare to carry out because of the constant fear of FBI surveillance. That includes making physical contact with American citizens who have wittingly or unwittingly become Soviet informants.

Or, as in the case of Col. Herrmann, traveling to Chicago or some other city to bury two containers at the foot of a tree for subsequent retrieval by another Russian agent.

"ILLEGALS ARE tough to discover," a counterespionage specialist told me. "They are professionals. And there are very few of them. We have no accurate handle on how many actually exist in the United States.

"It takes a tremendous amount of time and money to put these people in place. But once there, they are invaluable. Their real value will come in a time of severed relations or war.

"But they still can provide certain services that prevent jeopardizing the cover of KGB agents working in Soviet embassies and consular offices. The fact that Herrmann held the high rank of colonel in the KGB demonstrates the great confidence with which he was held in Moscow.

"A guy like that, once triggered, could cause incalculable harm. His prime purpose is to maintain a low profile until a time of dire need. But then, watch out. He can be dynamite.

"The Western intelligence community considers illegals a major problem. We're not talking about a trickle. But even if we were talking about only one or two illegal agents, that could be lethal. Even one agent could create chaos."

COL. HERRMANN was the classic example of the illegal espionage craftsman: Trained in East Germany after having been recruited from the military of a Soviet bloc nation, he entered West Germany as a phony refugee.

After six years in Canada, he came to the U.S. in 1968 as an immigrant with the assumed identity he had polished. Then, for nearly a dozen years, he remained buried like a time bomb behind the facade of a friendly neighbor in the New York suburb of Hartsdale.

The FBI isn't saying how it converted Herrmann into a double agent. Nor is it revealing how it unearthed him. But the agency's spectacular success with an illegal agent is an admitted rarity. Your next-door neighbor could be Herrmann's colleague and you'd never know it.

Make no mistake. The woods are crawling with Soviet spies, many of them also under business and diplomatic cover.

As of a year ago, the FBI had identified 35 per cent of the 1,200 Soviet personnel working in the U.S. as members of Kremlin intelligence services. And that figure does not include Soviet exchange students and merchant seamen who float through the country.

If nothing else, the surfacing of Col. Herrmann by the Justice Department last week dramatizes the need for a strong American intelligence structure and FBI and Central Intelligence Agency congressional charters that don't hamstring U.S. agents.

Anything less could spell national disaster.